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ABSTRACT

This paper advocates the use in the college reading classroom of Readers' Theater (a medium in which two or more oral readers, without memorization, special costumes, lighting, props, or sound effects, through creative oral reading cause an audience to explore drama, prose, and poetry). Sections in the paper discuss: the definition of readers' theater; its advantages and disadvantages; choices of materials and suggested materials; cutting and adaptation; classroom use; personal considerations; physical arrangement and movement; rehearsal; onstage and offstage focus; and group self-evaluation. (SR)

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# Have You Tried Readers' Theater in Your Reading Classroom?

by Barry Piccinino

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## Have You Tried Readers' Theater in Your Reading Classroom?
**"Fastest growing innovation in art and education."**

Literature based instruction has been the focus of Butte College's Reading program for the past four years. A fascinating way to encourage our developmental reading students to receive the appreciation of literature is to have them participate in literature groups. These literature groups consist of small group novel readings, or Readers' Theater groups. The latter, with a long history rooted in the presentationed mode in Ancient Greece, has recently had a resurgence of interest that invites imaginative experimentation in the reading classroom.

Readers' Theater groups influence students not only to love good literature, but to become tremendously excited over it with other students. According to Coger, *"When literature becomes enjoyable, personalized experience, it takes on a significance, or new excitement."* This excitement of sharing literature becomes fun when it prepares the reader for sharing literary material with an audience. Audiences too, become excited over this mode of presentation because they must use their imagination and emotions in order to appreciate fully the experience of the literature.

**Readers' Theater: A Definition**

> "But I thought Readers' Theater used stools and reading stands. This one had limited costumes and a set."
>
> "If you carry your script, it's Readers' Theater; if you don't, it's acting."
>
> "Why are they moving around like that? I thought this was supposed to be Readers' Theater."

Readers' Theater conforms to no one style; it invites creativity and imagination in the classroom. Basically, Readers' Theater is a medium in which two or more oral readers, without memorizations, special costume, lighting, props or sound effects, through oral reading cause an audience to explore drama, prose and poetry. Sometimes the Readers' Theater groups arrange the classroom with lighting and sound effects to suggest the dominant and changing mood of the reading. Coger (1967) suggests that *"Readers' Theater is creative oral reading which calls forth mental images of characters enacting a scene that exists primarily in the minds of the participants -- both the readers' and the audience's."* In other words, the reader attempts to speak the words in such a way that the authors' experience is faithfully imitated. The mode is suggestive in order not to detract from the language.

Finally, the main focus of Readers' Theater consists of providing a variety of literary works surrounding a central theme. For example, a short story, poem and a scene from a play might revolve around a theme, "personal relationships", "censorship", "love", etc.

Therefore, Readers' Theater is not an exercise in "reading parts", but is using well-planned and carefully chosen material as an effective stimulant for understanding literature, and adding cultural enrichment for the audience.

**Objectives and Advantages**

The reading teacher will see the infinite possibilities with the use of the Readers' Theater in the classroom. Reading classes become an exciting and challenging place to attend by experiencing how literature may come to life in the most satisfying manner. This is extremely beneficial to reading students because many of them have never had the opportunity to experience good literature, or be exposed to any form of dramatic productions.

*Such an activity in the reading classroom demonstrates to students that:*

1. Readers' Theater is an enjoyable, personalized experience, and takes on a new excitement in the classroom.

2. Readers' Theater allows literature to "come alive."

3. Readers' Theater is a theatrical art form in which the audience must use its imagination.

4. Readers' Theater provides practice in oral communication for the reader and in listening skills for the audience.

5. Readers' Theater is a collaborative art as readers join forces with the audience in working together to create a special world.

6. Readers' Theater is an art of discovery; when the performance begins students discover a world that is both familiar and unfamiliar to them. Students discover new ways of learning about themselves, their society, and their universe.

7. Readers' Theater can be life's double, but it is also something more than a reflection of life. It is a form of art -- mirror reflection. It is life's mirror organized meaningfully.

*Concomitantly, the Readers' Theater is useful for the instructor:*

1. It provides a classroom structure for cooperative work.

2. It helps develop a risk taking atmosphere.

3. It helps foster a sense of community in the classroom by building trust and acceptance.

4. It provides a medium in which the instructor, by wise guidance, can work to improve the social adjustment of adults, particularly those who are shy and retiring.

5. It gives the instructor a quick and valid way to evaluate programs in important reading skills, particularly those of word recognition, phrasing, rhythm and interpretation.

6. It adds a positive ambience to Reading classes as students learn to listen to each other, including themselves.

**Choices of Materials**

The range of literature suitable to Readers' Theater is limitless. Although, plays are most frequently used for Readers' Theater, prose and poetry can be equally successful. Regardless of the material, the choice for Readers' Theater should consist of emphasizing ideas, compelling characters, and enriched language. According to Kaeling-Andrich (1984), in selecting materials for Readers' Theater, a person should consider several factors:

1. Can it be done effectively within the time limit and in the acting area provided?

2. Do I have the talent to produce the show?

3. Is there an even distribution of lines for the characters?

----- Choice -----

**Plays:**

| | |
|---|---|
| *The Window* | Frank Marcus |
| *The Man with a Flower in His Mouth* | Luigi Pirandello |
| *Miss Julie* (one-act) | August Strindberg |
| *The Chairs* (one-act) | Eugene Ionesco |
| *Hamlet* (one-act) | William Shakespeare |
| *Waiting for Godot* | Samuel Becket |
| *Tartuffe* | Moliere |

**Prose:**

| | |
|---|---|
| *The Reluctant Dragon* | Kenneth Graphane |
| *Casey at the Bat* | Ernest Lawrence Thayer |
| *The Red Pony* | John Steinbeck |
| *Moby Dick* | Herman Melville |
| *In Cold Blood* | Truman Capote |
| *Call of the Wild* | Jack London |
| *The Little Prince* | Antoine de Saint Exupery |
| *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* | Robert Louis Stevenson |
| *Being There* | Jerzy Kosinski |

**Cutting and Adaptation**

Careful preparation of the script comes next. Which scene to use, characters to include, and kind of narration to write must be guided by several factors:

1. Time limit of production.

2. Theme of play.

3. Significant scene and line.

4. Clarity of plot and characters.

5. Variety of mood.

6. Balance in use of reading.

Narration should be used to form transitional bridges. For the most part, it should be kept to a minimum, but chosen to enhance the mood and movement of the whole production.

The prologue and/or exposition in plays is a built-in device for this purpose that explains to the audience the character, setting, time period, etc. This provides necessary background information so the action can be understood by the audience.

**Classroom Use**

The possibilities for Readers' Theater that can stimulate the Reading Classroom:

1. Studies in the history of the theater, enlivened with play readings from each important period:

   Greek, Medieval, Renaissance, Restoration, 18th Century, etc.

2. Studies of various types of plays, exemplified by readings from different types:

   e.g., *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *The Cradle Cong*, *Waiting for Godot.*

3. Discussions involving great themes, found in problem plays, historical plays:

   e.g., *A Doll's House*, *Miss Julie*, and *The Cherry Orchard.*

**Personal**

Students must be reminded that the criteria for casting of any of the parts is informal, and usually decided within the Readers' Theater group. But specific attention is given to distinctive voice quality for major characters.

The weakest reader, the most retiring member of the group, should not be assigned to be the narrator, or the whole show might suffer seriously. It is the narrator's responsibility to communicate directly to the audience, clarify, and intensify each scene. A reader with a clear voice, who is alert, will make the best narrator.

**Physical Arrangement and Movement**

The instructor will help the students in determining the physical facilities and arrangement within the constraints of a classroom. Some Readers' Theater groups have used stools, ladders, curtains, and chairs to illustrate the story. Students are encouraged to be creative and experiment in order to create a better pictorial composition.

The physical arrangement and movement of the scene most commonly used in the Readers' Theater groups are as follows:

1. Readers seated on high stools, with head down or turned away from the audience when not reading.

2. Readers seated behind, and at the end of, a long table, making no changes for entrance.

3. Readers seated in a semi-circle in student chairs, averting their bodies when offstage, facing front when on stage.

4. Readers standing in a semi-circle or line arrangement throughout the performance.

5. Readers who are immediately involved in a particular scene stand while the non-participating reader remains seated.

6. Readers holding a position without moving (freeze) when their characters are out of the scene.

**Rehearsal**

Once the Readers' Theater group has decided on the physical arrangement, the instructor must provide class time throughout the semester until the performance date. Students will find it necessary to meet after class to further their rehearsing before the performance. The students should make use of the following suggestions for their rehearsals:

1. Concentrate on segments of the material rather than working on the total script.

2. Put the material together until they sense the flow, the movement.

3. The reader should know that eyes are a person's most expressive feature; they should be used to convey emotional meanings of the material.

4. The reader should keep his/her eyes focused on the audience, rather than diverted toward the floor.

5. Readers must enter the scene at exactly the right moment.

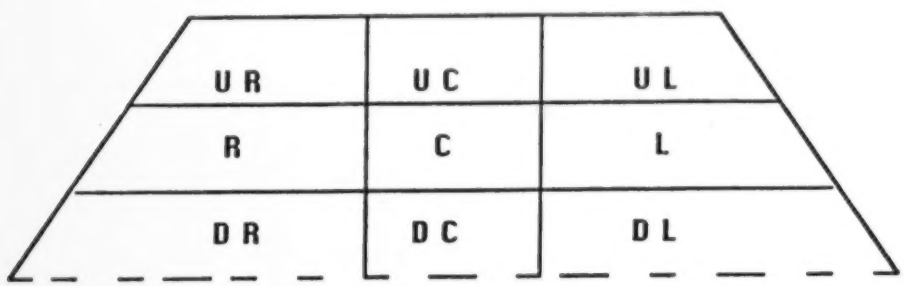
6. The reader's voice must be animated, alive, and expressive.

7. The dialogue must create a believable character, and the reading of the description must evoke mental pictures in the listener's mind.

Warm-up exercises are useful ways of increasing the readers' power to respond to the images. Students can show their reactions to some words that demand an emotional and sensory response.

| | |
|---|---|
| miserable | happy |
| dejected | elated |
| hard | soft |
| delicate | swashbuckling |

The chart indicates nine conventional divisions of the stage, with C meaning center; DC, Down Center; UC, Up Center; DR, Down Right; L, Left; UL, Up Left; and DL, Down Left. The chart helps in visualizing the physical elements of the various productions.

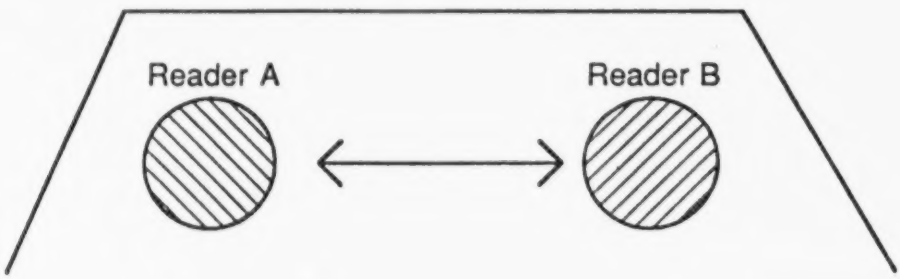



**Geography of playing space**

**Focus**

During rehearsals the Readers' Theater group must decide whether to use onstage focus or offstage focus. Whatever the group decides it must be consistent throughout the show.

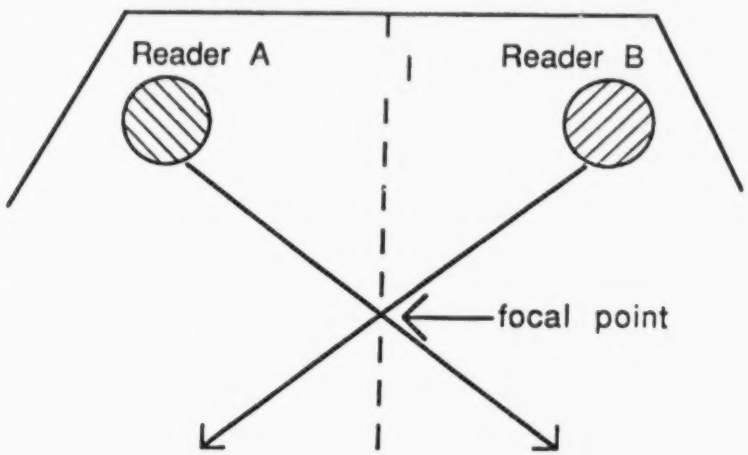
1. Onstage focus means the readers relate to each other on the stage, sensing each other's presence, sometimes actually reflecting in context, (when they glance up from the script.)




Audience

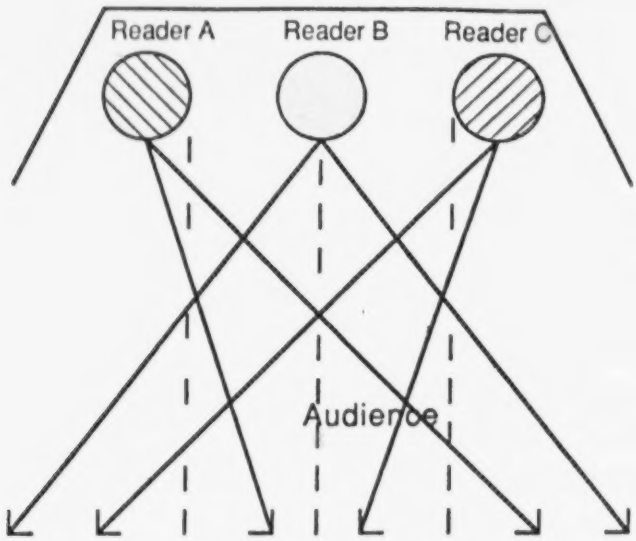
2. Offstage focus refers to the technique of having the readers envision the scene out in the audience.

**Offstage focus: two readers**



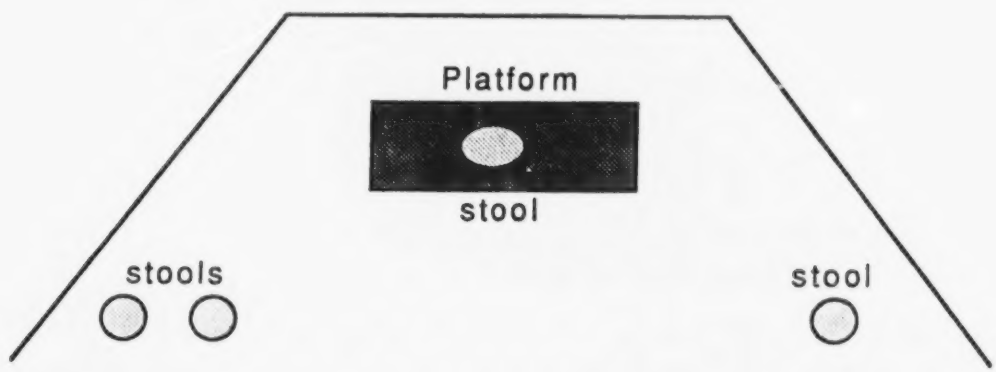

Audience

**Offstage Focus: three readers**




This is the way it was done:

**The Little Prince**

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**Evaluation**

*Reader's Theater and Literature Group Self-Evaluation*

Directions: Write a minimum of two pages critiquing the most effective qualities of your presentation. What improvements would you make if given the same task?

## Bibliography

Coger, Leslie. *Readers' Theater Handbook*, Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1967.